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ABSTRACT

This paper is a study of the Success for All (SFA) reading program in a New York City elementary school. In particular, the study investigates if SFA has been implemented as advocated by its developers. The study investigates whether SFA's designers achieved their goals, provides a critical analysis of the program, and conducts a survey of attitudes among teachers who were asked to implement SFA in the school. Findings revealed that the program's protocols, as designed by the developers, were only partially implemented. Standardized achievement test scores for children in all grades in the school investigated did increase in the 3 years SFA has been used. However, because SFA's prescriptive nature controls teaching methods, children's learning experiences, and curriculum content, some teachers were found to be less than positive in their attitudes toward the program. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/PM)

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SFA, A School's Experience.

by Elsie Torres-Rico

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SFA, A School's Experience

Elsie Torres-Rico

Abstract

This paper is a study of the Success for All (SFA) reading program in a New York City elementary school. In particular, the study investigates if SFA has been implemented as advocated by its developers. The study investigates whether SFA's designers achieved their goals, provides a critical analysis of the program, and a survey was conducted of attitudes among teachers that were asked to implement SFA in the school. Findings revealed that the program's protocols, as designed by the developers, were only partially implemented. Standardized achievement test scores for children in all grades in the school investigated did increase in the three years SFA has been used. However, because SFA's prescriptive nature controls teaching methods, children's learning experiences, and curriculum content, some teachers were found to be less than positive in their attitudes toward the program.

Introduction

As a New York City Teaching Fellow, my last two years have been a wild roller coaster ride for myself and colleagues. The New York Teaching Fellows are a group of people from different professions who have been hired by the NYC Chancellors Office to teach in the New York Public School System. After one month of training and still two years ahead of us to complete our masters degree, we were placed in the most academically challenged schools in New York City.

My first assignment was a second grade bilingual class with twenty-six students. All twenty-six students reading levels ranged from emergent to above grade level, skewed to the lowest levels. A major concern was how a new teacher with no classroom experience would be able to teach children to read and to continue motivating the ones that were already reading. We were told not to worry. The school used a reading program called SFA. What was SFA? SFA is an acronym for Success For All one of the most popular reading program used in schools that had been placed on the SURR list (Schools Under Registration Review) in New York City. It is a scripted reading program, that

only required three days of training. The SFA foundation guaranteed success for all children reading below grade level.

At first, I felt somewhat relieved that all the instructor had to do was follow a script. At the end of the three days there was still confusion as to the application and the timing needed to implement the program's components in the classroom. Despite the reassurance and the program manual that offered verbatim instruction for the programs components during the 90 minute lesson one did not feel very encouraged. .

During the last two years, teaching both SFA's reading components, Roots and Wings, certain questions arose about the program. These questions are:

1. What is the philosophy and components in the Success for All Program?
2. How is SFA working in my school?
3. Are all components being implemented?
4. How do the teachers in the school feel about SFA?
5. Is there sufficient support for teachers to implement the program?
6. Has SFA made a significant difference in the school's test results?

In this study the reading and writing programs are described. This study also discusses the eight-week assessments, tutors, cooperative learning, family support team involvement, the role of the facilitators, staff support teams and the professional development offered to the teachers. This investigation attempts to determine which components are currently implemented in the school and how SFA has been adopted in the school. A survey was conducted among my colleagues to assess their evaluations on the success of the program and their personal attitudes toward it. The purpose of this

study is to make teachers aware of Success for All's principal goals and evaluate the program performance in this school based on the survey and literature review.

Success For All

The Success for All Foundation (SFA) is a not-for-profit organization. The goal of SFA is to provide each student with learning experiences that allow them to acquire proficiency in reading at or above grade level by third grade. The SFA program begins with two key principles: prevention and immediate intervention. The SFA Foundation believes that learning problems must first be prevented by providing children with the best available reading program and by engaging parents in support of their children's reading success. (Slavin 1994)

History

According to Robert E. Slavin and Nancy A. Madden co-founders of the "Success For All" (2002) the program began in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1986. It was designed in a collaboration between the Center for Research on Effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students at Johns Hopkins University and the Baltimore City Public Schools. The pilot program began at a single school in1987and 1988. SFA's history, however really begins much earlier. The basic research was based on cooperative learning strategies from the 1970's. By 1980, a group at Johns Hopkins University had learned that children could be placed in groups and they could succeed academically if all of the members had mastered the material they were studying. In 1983, the group at John Hopkins University developed the Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition, or CIRC. Researchers on CIRC believed that they had found positive effects on students' academic achievement. Their research asserted that if both the process and curriculum

were integrated using cooperative learning methods in the program, it could be the basis for reading reform.

In 1985, they began work on the cooperative elementary school, a model that combined TAI (a math program) and CIRC. The model school made changes in it's organization. It integrated special education students, and family support programs were established. According to SFA these results were very positive, and this led them to believe that other schools would be able to replicate its success through prescriptive curriculum requiring faithful adherence to the program by teachers.

In 1987, Baltimore's then-superintendent and school board president had become interested in the research conducted by Slavin, Madden and Nancy Karweit. He reviewed the research on various approaches that had been effective with minorities and academically disadvantaged students, and he implemented their model in a Baltimore elementary school. By September, 1987, the teachers of Abbottston Elementary School in Baltimore had been trained and implementation of the program had begun. In 1988 four more schools were added in Baltimore and one in Philadelphia after some successful evaluation.

Throughout the 1990's, about 60% more schools participated in the new program. Research on SFA, at John Hopkins University asserted strong positive effects on reading and writing achievement in these schools. The University of Memphis also began to evaluate SFA and to support John Hopkins University's findings. (Slavin 2002)

In 1992, (Slavin, Apr. 2000) the Success For All Foundation received funding from the New American Schools Development Corporation (now New American

Schools, or NAS) to develop Roots & Wings. Both reading components that are currently used in the program.

By 1998 SFA had become too big and complex. Slavin and Madden felt that John Hopkins University could no longer handle all the details in running the program on site. They decided to leave Hopkins University and became the Success for All Foundation. Success for All is now being used in 48 states and overseas. (Slavin 2002)

Funding

In 1997, Congress allocated $150 million to help schools adopt "proven, comprehensive reform models." This Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration, or CSRD, gave specific examples of whole school-reform models. One of these school-reform models which has been rigorously researched is SFA.(Slavin, 2000))

Recently, (Greenlee 2001) Congress increased funding for CSRD and is moving to do the same with Title I. Title I is the largest federal program supporting elementary and secondary education and with annual expenditures of about $8 billion. Title I is an important source of funding for many high-poverty districts and schools. It is designed to help educate children with low academic achievement who are attending schools in high-poverty areas. The grants are intended to help schools establish and maintain programs that will help these students meet state standards in core academics subjects. The law does not stipulate exactly how Title I funds are to be spent, as long as they engage in reform strategies that help provide a high-quality curriculum and instruction for all children. (Jehlen 2002)

SFA Components

According to the SFAF (Slavin, Apr. 94), the reading program is divided into two components. The Roots (PK-1) reading level program emphasizes language development skills through children's literature, while focusing on phonemic awareness. Wings (2-5), the second component, uses the Scott Foresman's basals and novels to offer interactive opportunities for students to read, discuss, and write. For the Spanish bilingual program SFA offers Lee Conmigo (Roots) and Alas para Leer (Wings) for students in levels 1-5. In both the reading and writing program all of the students in the participating school is regrouped according to their reading levels into 90 minute reading classes . All classroom and resource teachers in the school work with smaller reading groups. Writing is emphasized throughout the grades. Writing instruction uses a writer's workshop format in which students plan, draft, revise, edit, and publish compositions with feedback from the teacher and group partners.

Students in grades 1-5 are assessed every eight weeks, changes in reading group placement are then made. At this point, children, who need additional help, would then be assigned to one-on-one tutoring. The information is also used to suggest alternative teaching strategies in the regular classroom, family support interventions, or other means of meeting students' needs. The school's full-time facilitator coordinates this process. In addition, the facilitator's role is to assist the Family Support Team, facilitates staff support teams, plans and implements staff development.

According to Slavin (Apr. 2000), staff support and professional development are other key factors for the success of the program. All Teachers in the Success for All Program are supposed to support one another through the training and implementation

process. A three day workshop is required for all teachers before the program begins. Success for All consultants return to the school for three two-day visits during the school year to work with principals, facilitators, and teachers.

According to the SFAF, family support is also an essential part of their program. The foundation believes that a good curriculum and instruction can ensure success for most children, but there are some children who still fail for reasons that go beyond the classroom. Children can fail due to countless of reasons such as, homelessness, absenteeism, hunger, and behavior problems and/or lack of parent involvement. The family support team is composed of the principal or assistant principal, facilitator, social worker, and other personnel. The job of the team is to organize resources in the school and community to make sure that all children in the school will have the opportunity to experience success. There are four major components that the family support team uses: monitoring and prevention of attendance, school based intervention, involving parent in their children's education and service integration, which bring outside help to the school if needed.

How do schools adopt Success for All/Roots & Wings?

SFA Foundation (Slavin 2002) encourages district and school staff to review program materials, view video tapes, schedule, visit a Success for All site and attend an Awareness Session. According to SFA, schools must apply to become a Success for All or Roots & Wings school. They believe that an application process ensures that the school staff becomes familiar with the elements of the program, will have the resources

to implement the program, and to agree as a staff to make the commitment to implement the program. A positive vote of 80% or more of all teachers is asserted as a requirement.

Critics of the SFA Reading Program

There have been several articles written about the research claims made on behalf of the SFA program. Many of these articles focus on the concern of the United States government which funds school-wide models, in particular, Success for All(SFA). Critics of the program claim that the effectiveness of SFA is questionable due to incorrect conclusions based on research conducted by Slavin and others associated with his research center. (Walberg and Greenberg 1999)

Stanley Pogrow, an associate professor of education at the University of Arizona, Tucson, specializes in school reform. He researched the claims made by Slavin and his associates that there had never existed a program with as much success as SFA. The successful adoption of SFA has enabled its developers and associates to exert influence over government policy studies on how to help the disadvantaged. If the research criteria has been controlled by the developers and associates of SFA, then the policies for helping the disadvantaged have been misguided and the research that has been generated is invalid. Pogrow and others also believe that the main problem is that both the rationale and the underlying research that support Success for All does not allow for open competition among other programs or models that would lead to specialized help for the disadvantaged instead of school-wide reform models. (Pogrow, 2002)

Many third-party evaluations of SFA's claims have concluded that the SFA program was not effective. There is a consensus among these studies that SFA has

produced some gains in the lower grades. Pogrow, however believes that these gains can be produced easily using much cheaper and simpler approaches than SFA's. He claims that much of the perception of the effectiveness of Success for All is based on a series of studies and articles written by Slavin and his associates. Many of these studies, for example in the Baltimore schools, showed very large differences between the performances of students in SFA versus that of students in non-SFA schools. Further investigation demonstrated that the SFA students in Baltimore and many other states still had not met state standards after five years in the program and students were reading three grade levels below (Greenlee 2001).

Non-SFA schools showed, overall, more favorable results using other literacy interventions according to another study conducted by Bobbie J. Greenlee and Darlene Y. Bruner on the success of reading programs and the reading achievement in Title I. The study also established that both SFA schools and non-SFA schools have a negative effect on proficient readers, with SFA Title I schools showing a decline in reading achievement compared to non-SFA schools. . The authors of this study feel that it is not surprising, since SFA targets the lowest readers in disadvantaged schools. The study presented a comparative analysis of Title 1 schools that had implemented Success for All reading program and schools that had developed their own reading program using the basal series. A recommendation made in the study is that schools should consider the cost of implementing Success for All. Schools might also need to consider other interventions to improve student performance and focus on helping teachers improve the quality of their work with all students.

Slavin's Response

According to Slavin (2001), Success for All has been the only reform model to have been extensively researched, not only by John Hopkins University but by independent researchers. He agrees that not every study has found positive outcomes, however, he claims that a considerable number have, especially when these schools have implemented the program in the way it was designed. He further claims that these studies themselves have been published in some of the most rigorous journals in education. Fifty-two researchers have conducted research on SFA, out of these, 35 studies were conducted by research institutions not affiliated with John Hopkins University or SFA. Only 5 of these studies have written primarily about situations in which Success for All failed to consistently improve student achievement. Slavin states that SFA critics have hyped the five studies and ignored the others.

Slavin claims that SFA's critics will not consider the program a success, if students do not score at grade level. He insists that study after study show strong evidence that indicates student success and higher reading scores, therefore proving that SFA does work.

In 1997, (Slavin, 2001) New York City schools in the Chancellor's District were strongly "encouraged" to adopt Success for All. These schools according to a study using data from the Internet also show gains in the first year. Further studies, however were not done because of changes in testing procedures. The study was conducted by SFA staff. Slavin maintains that Success for All is a success and that schools implementing all of the programs components as designed will demonstrate significant increases in children reading levels.

Survey Data and Results

A survey was constructed to assess teacher attitudes toward Success for All Reading program in grades 1-5. T he subjects in the study are teachers currently teaching in an elementary school in New York City. These teachers were assured that each survey would be anonymous, so the subjects could respond to the survey without fear of repercussions from the administration of the school. The survey was distributed to 50 teachers. Thirty-two were returned, 6 partially completed. The teachers responses follow:

1. If you had a chance to vote for SFA , would you vote for it?

   In response to the first question, 72% of the teachers surveyed would not vote to implement SFA in the school. The remaining 28% felt they would vote SFA reading program into the school.

2. Do you teach Wings or Roots?

   From the 32 responses, 63% teach Roots (K-1) reading level and 37 % teach the Wings (2-5) reading level.

3. To what extent do you feel SFA has made an improvement in the reading scores for students in the school?

   The third question revealed that 88% of the teachers did feel that SFA had made somewhat of an improvement in the reading scores. 12% felt that SFA did help increase the school's reading scores. All 32 respondents felt that SFA had some positive impact on the students reading levels.

4. To what extent do you feel there has been sufficient training in teaching SFA components?

Interestingly enough 84 % felt that SFA had provided sufficient training in Roots and Wings. Only 16% felt that there had not been sufficient training. Some of the 16% had been switched from Roots to Wings without any additional training.

5. Do you feel that the Roots and Wings programs are beneficial in your school?

Of teachers who use Roots, 80% felt that it was helping the children and 20% felt it was not helping the children. Wings teachers were split in half . They felt many children were moved to the next reading level without having mastered the previous level.

6. If you teach bilingual SFA, do you feel that there is sufficient support for the teachers and the students?

Only 12 teachers who responded to the survey teach bilingual SFA. 17% felt that there is sufficient support for both the teachers and the students. 83% felt that there is very little support for the bilingual SFA program .

7. To what extent do you implement the program as presented?

72% of the teachers implement the program "by the book" and 28% somewhat implement the program the way it was designed.

8. How many years have you been teaching SFA?

81% of the teachers in the school have been using the SFA program since it was mandated by the Chancellor's District. 19% have used the program 1-2 yrs.

9. How many years have you been teaching?

81% of the teachers have been teaching 5 years or more. 19% less than 5 years.

10. In your opinion what are the strongest features of SFA?

There were several comments made by the participants. In general most felt that the strongest features SFA had to offer were the phonic component and Treasure Hunt. Treasure Hunt is a comprehensive writing piece which children must complete for each story they read.

11. In your opinion what are the weakest features of SFA?

There were three comments that were repeated by the majority of the Participants. These were: Not enough room for teacher creativity, too rigorous time table to do all SFA components and children being moved to the next level without mastering the current level they were in.

An Interview With the School's Principal.

The principal of the elementary school was interviewed to obtain information pertaining to her feelings on the implementation of Success for All in the school. The interview was conducted on March 14, 2002.(The principal prefers to be unnamed.) The following are the questions and responses:

1. In your opinion has SFA made a difference in the reading scores in the school?

Yes, the reading scores have gone up substantially in the last two years. Children are reading close to or at grade level.

2. Why do you prefer SFA to previous reading programs?

The previous programs were not structured. We were using several programs based on whole language and many of the teachers were not proficient enough in these programs. I personally prefer a whole language model, but the instructor must know how to implement the program to acquire any success. SFA is very structured and everyone in the school is on the same page.

3. Do you feel that SFA meets the needs of students in the upper grades?

   No, SFA is not challenging enough, nor the literature interesting enough. I believe that SFA is successful in the lower grades, but a different reading program should be implemented for grades 4 and 5. I have presently implemented a program which is more literature rich .

4. Did the teachers in the school vote to adopt the SFA program?

   No. The program was mandated by the Chancellor's Office.

5. Do you feel this has made a difference in how the teachers have embraced the program?

   Perhaps. I know that some teachers have felt frustrated with the programs demands and some are not following the program "by the book".

6. There is a large Hispanic population in the school and there are presently 12 Bilingual SFA groups in the school, do you believe that there is sufficient support for the bilingual program by SFA in the school?

   All the materials and training to make the bilingual SFA program a success have been implemented. I know that the bilingual teachers do not feel this way, the classes are overcrowded and the foundation has not supplied us with any bilingual tutors for one-on one.

7. What would you like to say before we end this interview?

   SFA is another program of many; it is the best we have now. The reading scores continue to go up and that is a good thing. I am personally a whole language advocate and would prefer it to SFA. Instructors need to know to

implement the whole language approach but, not many have had sufficient staff development.

Conclusions

Whether SFA is viewed to have positive or negative effects depends upon the level that is used for comparison. Much of the early research has focused on the program's positive achievement scores. Schools scores do increase over time, particularly in lower grades, but there are inconsistent results on the achievement of students in the intermediate grades.

Critics like Pogrow and third-party researchers have questioned the methods used to evaluate the program. There is a need for independent research because so much funding is involved and policy decisions are being made mainly on the positive results asserted by SFA and associates. The study clearly demonstrated that standardized tests should be used by school districts to truly measure SFA's success.

Success for All will continue to be a favorite among school districts that are under intense pressure to increase test scores. The districts are attracted to scripted approaches that are seen as "teacher proof." It is much easier and cost-saving to just tell teachers what to say rather than to improve teacher competence through curriculum development or lowering class size. According to Greenlee, and Bruner (Fall 2001), recent studies have indicated non-SFA schools were also able to increase reading scores through curriculum development and lower class size. These studies have demonstrated favorable results are also being achieved in non-SFA schools. These schools have chosen to build their own reading programs and have spent their Title I funds to lower class size and/or to use other literacy enhancing approaches.

Despite SFA's philosophy to provide each student with learning experiences that would allow them to acquire proficiency in reading at grade level, their program does not address children that can not maintain the rigorous and fast pace of the program. Based on the survey, teachers in the school feel that many children are moved from level to level without mastering reading comprehension and teaching them the writing skills that are needed to succeed. According to the principal reading score have been raised, yet after three years they still remain below New York State Reading Standards.

For SFA to truly succeed in this school teachers need to understand the program's goals and all of its components. Not just the Roots, Wings and one-on-one tutoring, but all the other components that make up the program. Many teachers feel that the program works to a certain degree, but they are not committed to the program. Perhaps, this is due to the Chancellor's forced "encouragement" for the school to adopt the program. Teachers in the school are also less cooperative since there are no opportunities to be creative, nor do they have the time to deal with children that are not progressing.

My recommendation to the Chancellor and to SFA is that teachers must be well informed about the program's goals and frequent staff development must take place. Class size can also be addressed. Many SFA classes in the school have 18 to 20 children. Teachers experience great difficulty in covering all the programs structures during 90 minutes, especially if they have 2 or 3 children with behavior problems. Perhaps, most importantly, not all children learn in the same way and SFA can not meet all children's needs. Schools should also be given the opportunity to implement other reading programs in conjunction to SFA. Government funding should not be provided only to a program

that still has not been able to increase reading levels to state standards even after 5 years of implementation.

According to Slavin (Olson 1998), SFA is a kind of a heart-lung transplant. In a Success for All school, there's nothing to fall back on. They take control of instruction, curriculum and school organization. Ironically his statement begs the question, do school districts and the government know that heart-lung transplants do not have a high success rate? Convincing independent research suggests that SFA may provide a step toward improvement, but SFA is not able to achieve the standards required by most states and which our students need to be prepared to succeed academically.

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